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ABSTRACT

Since language is profoundly metaphorical, it is evident that metaphoric creation has held a place in the evolution of language and that people across all ages have contributed. Therefore, teaching children to interpret metaphors should have a place in all language programs for both the practical and aesthetic value it would afford them. Many scholars concerned with this issue have studied the problem in depth and have offered teachers various suggestions, above those found in basals, for helping children interpret metaphors. Among the suggestions are use of the salience imbalance theory, pertinent visual aids, brainstorming, feedback, commercial labels, television shows, and specific lesson plans and assignments. (MM)

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Language, Profoundly Metaphorical: Implications

Abstract

Since language is profoundly metaphorical, it is evident that metaphoric creation has held a place in the evolution of language and that people of all ages have contributed. Certainly, teaching children to interpret metaphors should have a place in all language programs for both the practical and aesthetic value it would afford them.

Many scholars concerned with this have studied the problem in depth and have offered teachers many suggestions, above those found in basals, for helping children interpret metaphors. Among the suggestions are use of the salience imbalance theory, pertinent visual aids, brainstorming, feedback, commercial labels, TV shows, and specific lesson plans and assignments -- all explained in great detail to facilitate their use by concerned teachers. A number of these studies are addressed in this paper.

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Language, Profoundly Metaphorical: Implications for Teachers

Howard Batchelor (2), whose views seem shared by many, has called metaphor "the single most important device of literary language and the principle means by which ordinary usage increases its range of definition." "People find it easy," he states, "to grasp concepts when they are expressed by concrete analogy." Surely, children provide us with an excellent example of this.

Children have been known to be direct and blunt in their speech, and metaphors serve their purposes very well. Anyone who has dealt with young children has, no doubt, heard such expressions as "Mary's a pig," probably referring to her eating habits or her personal hygiene; "Jane is an elephant," no doubt a reference to her size; and "John's a nut," perhaps a questioning of his mental capabilities. Complimentary metaphors are also used -- expressions such as "Alice is a peach," "Ruth is a doll," and "Frank's a brain" (meaning that he's an intellectual).

In regard to the use of metaphors which appear negative, years of observation of children have been convincing in the fact that, though not in good taste, their statements are effective, are not made with malice aforethought, nor are they intended to be vicious. They are simply direct statements expressed in the most effective way the child knows at the moment. It's done in a fleeting moment after which the children can be seen playing together, interested in each other's welfare, and thoroughly

enjoying their togetherness.

Continued observation of children's ball games have added to the many metaphors they use. It is remembered that when a child with poor hand-eye coordination would get up to bat, members of the opposing team would chant, "Easy meat!", meaning that he/she was sure to strike out.

Metaphors continue to serve people, young and old, throughout life. Recently, the expression, "John's a pistol" was heard. This writer thought it was a new expression but soon learned that it has been around for a long time and that it is used a lot in sports. Her information was acquired from young college students who offered her the following attributes which they felt John and pistol share: volatile, explosive, someone or something to rely on, and a trustworthy friend.

Later, a young graduate student who followed a particular basketball team gave an explanation which shows people as creators of metaphors to serve their purposes. The young man explained that a player who shoots a lot instead of passing the ball to fellow players to give them a chance to "make a basket" is called a pistol. Perhaps this is a means of changing the conduct of a peer without giving him a direct reprimand. It shows very clearly that in order to interpret a metaphorical statement, one needs more than the knowledge that it is non-literal, so must be interpreted, and more than the vocabulary for interpreting it.

"Everyday use" of metaphors is by no means limited to

children. A man calls his wife a jewel or his car a lemon. The scientist speaks of waves of light. Churchill's "iron curtain" is familiar to many, and "priming the pump" is an expression used by journalists.

Michael Kramer (5), a chief political correspondent, entitled a recent article, "A Metaphor for Dukakis as Manager." He mentioned in particular a pilot program which can be viewed as that metaphor. He referred to a pilot program designed in part to provide pregnant mothers with coupons for obtaining fruits and vegetables needed for nutritional balance. As to Dukakis' management, August Schumacher, his food and agricultural commissioner, said "Michael Dukakis didn't actually invent the coupon scheme, but he encouraged me and fought for the money before the plan became so obviously popular."

At election time, the air is filled with politicians' metaphors, "different ones for different votes." A favorite with special appeal to the farmers is, "The family farm isn't only as American as apple pie; it IS apple pie."

Common words when used repeatedly as metaphors develop new senses. For example, in the phrase table leg, leg was once a metaphor as was eye in eye of the needle.

Recently, in an Associated Press article (1), it was explained that "couch potato," "fat city" and "junk bond" can now be found in the first new College Edition of Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language (10) in 18 years. Couch potato is defined as "a chronic television viewer"; fat city is

"a place or condition of prosperity, comfort, success, etc."; and a junk bond is "a high-yield speculative bond often used to finance the take-over of a corporation."

In a recent New York Times News Service article (6), Robert Farris Thompson, a professor of African and Afro-American art history at Yale University is reported as saying, "The hip-hop slang that is finding its way into American speech is traceable to black language and inner-city speech patterns that have long been evolving. Some of the hip-hop's grammatical constructions and vocabulary have their roots in West African languages like Mandekan and Ki-kongo. For example, the style of rap boasts, and the way in which badness is turned inside out, derives from the metaphoric characteristics of Mandekan."

Some of the hip-hop words now in vogue are listed and defined in the article. The word "chill" is listed as an adjective and also as an intransitive verb. As an adjective, it is defined as "highly popular", and as an intransitive verb, it means "to relax, lounge, be casual." Jam, b-boy, b-girl and bum-rush are other words listed.

Children use and understand their metaphors well. They're their statements of the moment; they are living them, and it's their peers with whom they are communicating. Unfortunately, later on when they are confronted with metaphors in prose and poetry, they have great difficulty in understanding them. They don't seem to relate to the language, the time or the experience. They need help.

Many children have seen and felt the burning pavement, but they haven't been privileged to see the beauty and feel the cool of vast expanses of green grass. They have not smelled the roses or picked the daisies, nor have they eaten wild strawberries. They have not heard the ripple of the brook, the song of the robin or the cry of the whippoorwill. They have not traveled country roads lined with tall trees -- a beautiful picture when lighted by the moon.

Added to this meager background is the writer's style which must be dealt with if understanding and enjoyment of a selection are to take place. For example, Alfred Noyes make great use of metaphors in "The Highwayman". It is not difficult to see why some children would need help in understanding and enjoying the many metaphorical expressions in the poem.

The first three lines of the poem, given below, are an excellent description of the setting, and they also convey the romantic mood of the poem:

> The wind was a torrent of darkness among the gusty trees,
> The moon was a ghostly galleon tossed upon cloudy seas,
> The road was a ribbon of moonlight over the purple moor ....

The metaphor is uniquely characteristic of poetry where greater intensity of feeling and clarity of expression are so vital. It can also have considerable impact in prose. Shakespeare's plays contain many brilliant metaphors, and "The 23rd Psalm" is based on a metaphor.

It is often difficult for children to realize the essential

aesthetic purpose of the author's use of the metaphors, that is, to expand their range of perception and response to the many objects and ideas about which he/she has written. They need help, therefore, in understanding the beauty of the literature they have inherited; it's their birthright.

Fortunately, there are scholars who have devoted years of study as to how to help children understand these metaphors. They have gone much beyond information given in the school texts as they feel that this information is inadequate. Readence, J.E. et al (7) discovered that "the typical instructional sequence found in a survey of widely-used basals involves defining a metaphor and then offering opportunities for practice in interpretation." They found little of what they call "how to" suggestions for the teacher to use with students who need help. Therefore, they developed an instructional plan for helping students to acquire a process for interpreting metaphors. They based their instructional sequence on two principles: "the salience imbalance theory of metaphorical interpretation of Ortony, Vondruska, Foss, and Jones (1985), and the direct explicit teaching of reading comprehension as outlined by Pearson (1984)."

The authors explain the salience imbalance hypothesis as involving "the process that readers use to interpret metaphors." They offer as a sample sentence, "The man's feet were blocks of ice." "Feet," the topic, and "blocks of ice," the vehicle, though not really alike, do share an attribute; each can be

cold. The attribute, "cold" has greater salience in the vehicle than in the topic; this is salience imbalance. It must be promoted from its normally low salience in the topic to a position of high salience.

Readence et al modified the direct teaching of comprehension processes as outlined by Pearson for the instructional sequence. Their modified sequence follows:

(a) relevance -- students were made aware of the purpose of this instruction:
(b) definition -- students were told how to apply the strategy, and the instructor modeled its use;
(c) guided practice -- students were given feedback on their own use of the strategy as instruction proceeded from the simple to the complex;
(d) self-regulation -- students were given the opportunity to try out the strategy through the use of a "think aloud" step and to develop ways to monitor their own use of the strategy; and,
(e) gradual release of responsibility -- students were gradually given more responsibility for their own learning.

Both the salience imbalance and direct teaching were observed in a study in which the authors tried to determine if their process instructional group or the basal instructional group would result in students' better interpretation of metaphors. Results indicated that the process instructional group out-performed the basal instructional group. The students concerned in the study were elementary school students.

Jean Greenlaw and Margaret E. McIntosh (4) taught a twelve-week course in a magnet high school for the gifted and talented. They reported that during the course in which many skills and concepts were conveyed, their students "moved from a simple

definition and recognition of surface metaphor to an ability to create metaphor."

One assignment, the creation of banners representing the students, "generated the most pleasure and indicated the depth of response to metaphor." The authors explain further:

> The idea began during the study of The Chronicles of Prydain, when it was pointed out that a king had a banner that flew whenever he was in residence. The banner represented the king in some way; for example, King Smoit, always described as bear-like, had a banner on which there was a bear.
>
> During the last part of the course, each student selected a large piece of felt and created a banner. Again, some students responded in a predictable way, such as Maria, who contrived a bull's head on a red background. She described it thus:
>
> This is a bull. I guess I picked it because it's kind of easy and my zodiac sign is Taurus and my last name is Del Toro. I guess sort of, I am stubborn.

The Use of feedback and "think aloud" are thought to be helpful in getting all students to participate in interpreting metaphors, as one's background of experience plays an important part in the interpretation. Stephen Thompson (9) has offered a very helpful visual for students to use in sorting out their associations with the topic and the vehicle in a metaphorical expression. It is the chart he used in teaching the poem, "Puppy," by Robert L. Tyler.

He explained to the students that although the poet doesn't put it in so many words, he is, in effect, saying, "The hose is a cobra." How can this be? He then explained his chart -- the associations he had made with cobra and hose from his experiences

and the marking system he had used. He then asked the students to copy his chart, have a brainstorming session with themselves and add their own associations using the correct marking system. A copy of Thompson's chart follows:

Comparison chart for the poem "Puppy"

hose	cobra
—	snake
✓	long
✓ +	makes a sound
✓ +	fangs
✓ +	hisses
—	India
✓ +	sways to and fro
✓	coiled
✓	poisonous
—	kills elephants
✓ +	alive
✓ +	menacing

Idea implied in poem: "The hose is a cobra."

— dissimilarity
✓ similarity
✓ + important similarity

Sanders, D.A. and Sanders, J.A. (8) have offered teachers a metaphoric method of seven steps which they tell them, "can make your lessons both creative and instructive, affective and cognitive." The seven steps follow:

1. Establish the specific objective of the lesson and the broad concept to which you'll relate it.

2. Choose a metaphor.

3. Write a guided fantasy, or plan another experience that directly involves your students with the metaphor you've chosen.

4. Introduce the lesson.

5. Read your guided fantasy.

6. Ask questions about the experience.

7. Tie the imagery to your original lesson goal and help students make the connection -- the "aha" moment of creative insight.

The Sanders have also offered a number of metaphoric lessons in which they name the broad concept, the possible teaching objectives and the fantasy and activity ideas. Two samples are given below:

Broad Concept	Possible Teaching Objectives	Metaphor	Fantasy and Activity Ideas
Diversity	Appreciating differences in nature, in people. Understanding the value of cultural differences.	Leaves	Create a guided fantasy in which each student sees himself as one special leaf among many.
Security	Appreciating strength and structure of democracy, the Constitution, and so on. Learning trust in relationships.	Rock	Give each student his own rock to study, feel, and become comfortable with. Have students pretend they are tiny enough to stand on the rocks.

Geller (3) has suggested the use of any lyrics such as Paul Simon's, "Some Folks Lives Roll Easy," the works of poets who are lyricists, commercial product labels such as Solo, a detergent, and TV shows. The children's familiarity with, and interest in, the known should bridge the gap between the known and the unknown in interpreting metaphors.

It is interesting to note that many of the scholars who have studied metaphors extensively believe that children, in general, can create metaphors as well as interpret them. This is contrary to Aristotle's belief that they were created by geniuses. Decades of personal experience with children in elementary and secondary schools in various geographical locations lends support to the belief of the scholars.

It is concluded that teaching children to interpret metaphors should be a part of every language program.

Implications for Teachers

1. Include teaching the interpretation of metaphors in your language programs.

2. Consider using some of the suggestions offered by scholars who have studied the teaching of metaphors extensively.

3. Prevail upon textbook authors and publishers to include some of the scholars' suggestions in the manuals for their basal readers.

4. Share your successes with others.

5. Keep abreast of the work of scholars concerned with the teaching of metaphoric interpretation. Their articles continue to appear in reputable educational periodicals.

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